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Islam in Indonesia

Indonesia is a nation comprising more than 300 ethnic groups, with many distinct cultures, languages and customs. There are also many different religions but the major religion of Indonesia is Islam. Figures vary but up to 90 per cent of the population is Muslim, the world's largest population of Muslims within one nation.

History – Early introduction

In ancient times the people of the many diverse lands of Indonesia practised a range of religions, including animism and ancestor worship. Hinduism and Buddhism spread across the region in the 1st century AD and these two faiths dominated the country until the spread of Islam across the region from the 10th century onwards. Up to the 13th century Islam was spread mostly by visiting seamen, merchants, fishermen and settlers from India, China and Arabic lands. Violence did not play a major role in the spread of the religion, nor was its growth due to any organised missionary efforts. By the 14th century Islam had become well established in some areas.

What is Islam?

Islam was established in AD 570 by the Prophet Mohammed and shares roots with both Judaism and Christianity. It is based on the teachings of Mohammed as written in the holy book known as the Koran, or Qu'ran. These writings set out the origins of the religion and include some stories and incidents from the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. In Islam Jesus is regarded as an important prophet. There are no rituals of initiation in Islam. To be Muslim a person needs only to profess a belief in the one God (Allah) and to surrender to the will of God. The name Islam is derived from the Arabic word for "surrender". Muslims, as adherents of Islam are also known, need to follow the Five Pillars Of Faith (see below).

Five Pillars Of Faith

1st Pillar – Faith In God

Islam means "surrender" because the religion requires absolute surrender to God. Muslims believe "there is no true God but God (Allah) and Mohammed is the messenger of God", a phrase often repeated, not only during prayers but at any time faith is needed. In a sense, saying and believing this statement is enough to make you a Muslim, but observing all of the rules and practices shows continuing faith. The God of Islam is not a different God to that of Christians and Jews but is considered the only true God.

2nd Pillar – Prayer

Muslims believe in a direct relationship with God, without the intercession of priests, and pray to God five times a day: at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and at night. Muslims must always pray facing the direction of the holy capital of Islam, Mecca, in Saudi Arabia.

3rd Pillar – The Fast

In the Muslim calendar the ninth month of Ramadan is the holiest and is reserved as a time of fast. Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset in remembrance of Mohammed's fast before receiving the revelation of the Koran. The Muslim calendar follows the cycles of the moon and is shorter than the solar year of 365 days, therefore Ramadan falls at different times every year (according to the Western calendar).

4th Pillar – Zakat (giving to charity)

Giving to the poor is an obligation of every Muslim. Zakat means purification and giving to the needy is a way of purifying one's self and one's possessions, because the possession of wealth and worldly goods is believed to distract the faithful from God.

5th Pillar – The Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca)

The Koran says every Muslim must try to undertake the pilgrimage (Hajj) to the holy city of Mecca once in their lifetime. If reasons such as lack of money or illness prevent them, they may make a sacrifice instead. The rituals of the Hajj were established by Mohammed in his farewell pilgrimage in 632. Millions of Muslims try to make it to Mecca but it is estimated that because of financial constraints and limits on the numbers who can actually enter the city (pictured) to perform the rituals, only about 20 per cent of Muslims are able to undertake the Hajj.

Show of faith: The evening prayer is performed during Ramadan at Istiqlal mosque in Jakarta, Indonesia

> "There is a world of Islam beyond the Middle East, and Indonesia can do so much to show how people can live peacefully together"
>
> Marty Natalegawa, Indonesian Foreign Minister (quoted in *The Jakarta Post*)

INSIDE A MOSQUE

The mosque is a building where Muslims gather to worship and also come together for study and social events. There is minimum furniture inside and no pictures or statues. The only decorations are patterns and words from the Koran. Men and women are not allowed to pray together – there is a screened-off area upstairs for women.

Elegant: A Muslim woman wearing a hijab designed by top Indonesian fashion designer Itang Yunasz

Distribution of religions in Indonesia

Source: United Nations Development Programme

History – The Nine Saints

The last great Indonesian Hindu empire, Majapahit, had crumbled by the 14th century. By the 15th century there were many areas of Indonesia that were predominantly Muslim. Much of the spread of Islam in this period is attributed to a group of men known as the Nine Saints, who are revered by Indonesian Muslims. Many were princes who established schools, built mosques and fostered the faith. Others, such as Sunan Gunungjati, also known by the name Fatahillah and who took on the Portuguese, were defenders of the faith. The stories vary; some may be merely legends while others are based on real historical figures.

Variations on Islam

In Indonesia there are two main variations on Islam – the traditional and the modernist. Traditional Islam has taken hold in those areas where Islam first reached the population. One form of this is known as Kebatinan, a mixture of several ideas borrowing as much from ancient pre-Islamic ideas as from Islam. Its followers are known as Abangan, from the Javanese word "abang" meaning "red". Modernist Muslims or Santri refer to themselves as "putihan" or white Muslims and consider their beliefs more pure than those of the Abangan. A large proportion of Indonesian Muslims could be considered moderate in their religious beliefs; more radical fundamentalist Muslims are in the minority.

The past: A Dutch colonial-era house

Extremism

While the majority of Indonesian Muslims live peacefully with their Hindu, Christian and Confucianist neighbours, there have been some acts of terrorism against non-Muslims and extreme incidents of violence between members of different religions in Indonesia, particularly in the past two decades. Some of this radicalisation of Islam is due to the role Islam has played in both opposing Dutch colonialism up to independence in the 1940s and in eliminating communism in the '60s. However, most Muslims see these radical elements as undesirable in that they cause political instability within Indonesia and badly affect the nation's reputation abroad.

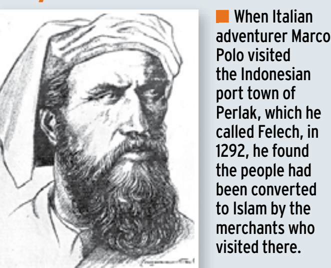
Did you know?

During the centuries when Indonesia was dominated by colonial powers, Islam often became a rallying point for opposition to Portuguese and Dutch rule.

Did you know?

The Minangkabau people of Sumatra are strongly Muslim but their ancient culture remains firmly matrilineal or based around the women in the family. For instance Minangkabau women are first in line to inherit and boys leave their family when they marry and move in with their wife's family.

Did you know?



- When Italian adventurer Marco Polo visited the Indonesian port town of Perlak, which he called Felech, in 1292, he found the people had been converted to Islam by the merchants who visited there.

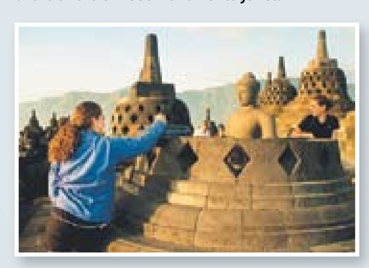
Indonesia's other religions

In Indonesia's population of about 234 million people, about 200 million are Muslim, but other religions have a modern presence and have played a significant part in the country's history. Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism are the six official religions of Indonesia. Of the 34 million or so people who are not Muslim, the majority are Christian, comprising about 8 per cent. Some parts of Indonesia have a majority Christian population, such as Irian Jaya, which is mostly Protestant due to the influence of Dutch Christian missionaries from the 16th century onwards. Catholicism is the predominant religion on the island of Flores. Hinduism and Buddhism can be found mainly in Bali and small areas of Kalimantan and Sumatra. Confucianism is the smallest group and the religion was introduced by Chinese traders as early as the AD 300.

Treasure: A gold Hindu armband

Did you know?

- The world's largest Buddhist temple is in Indonesia. The Buddhist temple complex at Borobudur (pictured), built in the ninth century, is one of Indonesia's most popular tourist attractions and is on the UNESCO World Heritage list.



Sources and further study

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Cl@ssmate EVERY TUESDAY
Email: lennont@dailytelegraph.com.au Phone: 9288 2542
Editor: Troy Lennon Additional writing: Maureen Shelley Graphics: Paul Leigh, Will Pearce and David Matthews